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ABSTRACT

Project Atlantans Learning Employment Responsibilities Together (ALERT) was conducted by the Atlanta (Georgia) Public School System, in 1991, for the ninth consecutive year. Project ALERT is an education component of the Summer Youth Employment Program that represents a concerted effort to address problems associated with the high unemployment rate among economically disadvantaged youth. During the summer of 1991, Project ALERT provided a variety of learning opportunities for 68 students entering grades 8 through 12. Ninety percent (61) of the students completed the program, with most of those who did not finish leaving because of illness. Participants evaluated the program positively and their attendance rate was satisfactory, with at least 80 percent attending at least 85 percent of the time. Pretest and posttest scores indicated that students improved in reading and mathematics skills, with the greatest improvement in mathematics. Improved posttest performance was demonstrated by at least 75 percent of the students. Over 75 percent received 15 hours of academic credit. Participants also gained valuable work experience and on-the-job skills. Project ALERT met its major goals and is considered a success. There are three tables of study data. (SLD)

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EVALUATION OF PROJECT ALERT, (ATLANTANS LEARNING EMPLOYMENT RESPONSIBILITIES TOGETHER) SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM 1991

Department of Research and Evaluation
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EVALUATION OF PROJECT ALERT (ATLANTANS LEARNING EMPLOYMENT RESPONSIBILITIES TOGETHER) SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

1991

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EVALUATION OF PROJECT ALERT
(ATLANTANS LEARNING EMPLOYMENT RESPONSIBILITIES TOGETHER)
SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM
1991

Project ALERT was conducted by the Atlanta Public School System (APS) for the ninth consecutive year during the summer of 1991. Project ALERT is an education component of the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and represents a concentrated effort to address problems associated with the high unemployment rate among economically disadvantaged youth. Although the rate of unemployment has declined nationally, the rate of unemployment for minority youth continues to be greater than that of other groups.

PROJECT DESIGN

Project Description

This project was developed and initiated by APS in conjunction with the Atlanta Private Industry Council, Incorporated (PIC). Funded under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Project ALERT was designed to provide service to heighten the employability level of 100 students rising to grades 8-12 (14-18 years old). Participants were involved in Project ALERT from June 12 through August 9, 1991.

The participants in this project were economically disadvantaged applicants whose scores on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Tests (GCRT), BST Preparation Tests, or Georgia Basic Skills Tests (GBST) in reading and mathematics indicated that they were academically at risk. Each participant was selected and referred by the PIC Summer Intake staff. All participants were residents of the City of Atlanta, and all but one were enrolled in APS during the 1990-91 academic year. Prior to enrollment in Project ALERT, each participant was required to indicate a willingness to participate.

Participants were assigned to various public and private nonprofit organizations four hours per day, five days a week for a total of twenty (20) hours per week. The 20 hours of work experience were designed to provide meaningful, well-supervised opportunities for expansion and/or development of employability skills.

In addition to the 20 hours of work, each participant was enrolled in educational activities for 17½ hours per week. These educational activities focused on the improvement of reading and mathematics skills. Those participants successfully completing the coursework received 15 hours of academic credit. In addition to the academic classes, career education enrichment activities were provided through field trips, assembly programs, counseling. Participants were paid at the rate of $4.25 per hour for the 20 hours of work experience.

Project ALERT was based at the centrally located Kennedy Middle School for the instructional portion of the program. The specific worksites were located throughout the City of Atlanta at approved agencies.

Program Objectives

The primary goal of this project was to increase the potential for future employment of participants by helping them improve academic performance and gain meaningful employment experience.

Specific goals and objectives were as follows:

Goal #1: To enhance the basic education skills of eligible youth (ages 14-18).

Objective 1: To provide remedial instruction in reading and mathematics to 100 rising ninth through twelfth graders. Upon completion, 75 percent of the participants will demonstrate an increase in academic performance as measured by the ALERT pre- and post-tests.

Objective 2: To ensure that improvement in academic performance is documented.

Goal #2: To provide personal management skills training and enrichment activities in career education to participants.

Goal #3: To provide participants with meaningful, well-supervised work experiences.

Performance Standards

The following performance standards were established for Project ALERT:

1. All funded slots for participants will be filled by June 17, 1991, on the condition that an acceptable number of PIC referrals are made.
2. Slot vacancies must be filled within three working days of notification of termination.
3. A minimum of 80 percent of the participants will attend at least 85 percent of the time.
4. A minimum of 75 percent of the participants who enroll will complete the program objectives (i.e., will receive 15 hours of academic credit).
5. Dropouts will not exceed 10 percent of total terminations.
6. A minimum of 75 percent of the program participants will demonstrate improved academic performance in reading and mathematics skills. The criterion-referenced pretests and posttests developed by the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) Department of Research and Evaluation will measure changes in competency levels.

Project ALERT officially started on June 10, 1991. The first few days of the program were used for staff orientation and preplanning. Curriculum areas of concentration were established, and operational procedures were reviewed with staff members. In addition, staff members received test data for use in the

appropriate placement of participants for class grouping. Each student's placement was based in part upon his/her test scores used to determine eligibility for participation in the project.

Students enrolled in Project ALERT attended three half-day (4-hour) orientation sessions, June 12-14. The first session was conducted by APS staff; the second, by PIC staff; and the third, by Project ALERT staff. Participants were paid for their attendance during the twelve hours of orientation.

Following the orientation and assignment to homerooms, students were cycled through their class schedules. Instructional activities were designed to address individual student academic weaknesses, although the overall objectives for all students were the same.

Beginning at 7:45 a. m. each school day, Project ALERT participants were involved in academic tasks, classes for enhancing self-esteem, career-oriented activities and/or field trips, with one-half hour for lunch. Attending the morning classes was a prerequisite for working each afternoon.

FINDINGS

Data Collection and Analysis

The data gathered on Project ALERT participants were analyzed in order to determine the degree to which the performance standards were met. The coordinator of the project provided enrollment information and copies of grade sheets showing students' names and ID numbers, numerical and letter course grades, conduct grades, and the number of days absent. Evaluation of performance on standards 1-5 was based on the analysis of these data.

Project participants were administered the Project ALERT pretest during the initial days of the program and the Project ALERT posttest one week prior to the program's end. These tests were designed as parallel forms of an instrument developed to measure performance in reading and mathematics in areas of weakness identified from previous GBST results of APS students. Differences between participants' Project ALERT pretest and posttest scores were examined by comparing the scores obtained on the reading and mathematics subtests and the total test scores. Evaluation of performance standard 6 was based on this analysis.

Although not required by the contract, students' evaluations of the project were also obtained. Students present on the last day of the project completed a questionnaire on which they indicated how much they liked or disliked eleven different aspects of the program, their interest in participating in the program again, and suggestions for improving the project. The results of the students' evaluations are presented after the results related to the performance standards.

Results

The six performance standards are listed below along with the results of the data analyses.

1. All funded slots for participants will be filled by June 17, 1991, on the condition that an acceptable number of PIC referrals are made.

   One hundred slots were funded for Project ALERT in 1991. PIC referred 78 eligible students, 65 of whom enrolled in the program by June 17. 1991, and 3 of whom enrolled late. Ten of the referred students declined to enroll. Because too few referrals were made by PIC and were not made early enough for effective recruitment, this performance standard could not be met.

2. Slot vacancies must be filled within three working days of notification of termination.

   The seven terminations from the program occurred after June 26, the last date on which new participants could enroll. Therefore, no slot vacancies could be filled, and this performance standard could not be met.

3. A minimum of 80 percent of the participants will attend at least 85 percent of the time.

   An 85% attendance rate was equivalent to attendance on at least 34 of the 40 days of the project (excluding orientation). Of the 61 participants who completed the program, 49 (80%) attended at least 34 days, or 85% of the time. This performance standard was met.

   It should be noted, however, that 14 (21%) of the students had perfect attendance.

4. A minimum of 75 percent of the participants who enroll will complete the program objectives (i.e., will receive 15 hours of academic credit).

   Of the 68 students enrolled in the program, 56 (82%) received 15 hours of academic credit (Table 1). This performance standard was exceeded.

TABLE 1

ACADEMIC CREDIT RECEIVED BY PROJECT ALERT ENROLLEES, 1991

Credit Received	N	%
15 hours	56	82
7.5 hours	1	2
None, but completed the program	3	4
None, but did not complete the program	7	10
Ineligible (middle school student)	1	1
TOTAL	68	

5. Dropouts will not exceed 10 percent of total terminations.

   Seven program participants, or 10% of the total number of participants, dropped out of or were terminated from the program because of nonattendance. Four of these participants felt unable to continue because of pregnancy or illness. The reasons for the other three students' absences were undetermined.

   Without a definition of dropout for this project, it is unclear whether any or all of these terminations should be considered dropouts. Therefore, performance on this standard cannot be adequately assessed.

6. A minimum of 75 percent of the program participants will demonstate improved academic performance in reading and mathematics skills. The criterion-referenced pretests and posttests developed by the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) Department of Research and Evaluation will measure changes in competency levels.

   As shown in Table 2, 34 (62%) of the 55 students who took both the pretest and the posttest scored higher on the reading portion of the posttest; 51 (93%) scored higher on the mathematics portion; and 53 (96%) scored higher on the total test. This standard was exceeded in mathematics and overall, but not met in reading.

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF CHANGES FROM PRETEST TO POSTTEST SCORES
PROJECT ALERT, 1991

Direction of Score Change	Reading		Mathematics		Total Test	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Increase	34	62	51	93	53	96
Decrease	10	18	2	4	2	4
No change	11	20	2	4	0	0
TOTAL	55	100	55	101	55	100

Note: Percentages rounded to nearest integer.

The results of the student's evaluations are provided in Table 3. Forty-two (69%) of the 61 participants who completed the program responded to the questionnaire. A large majority, 88% or more of the respondents, indicated that they liked "a lot" or "a little" each of the eleven aspects of the program included in the questionnaire. All of them responded that they liked the self-esteem class.

TABLE 3
RESPONSES TO STUDENT EVALUATION (N = 42)

PROJECT ALERT, 1991

1. Please circle the letter that best describes your feelings about each of the following:

		Percent Responding					
		Liked a Lot	Liked a Little	Disliked a Little	Disliked a Lot	Not Sure	No Response
Orientation	1	50	45	--	--	--	5
Math class	2	55	33	5	5	--	2
Reading Class	3	74	19	7	--	--	--
Computer lab (math)	4	60	31	5	5	--	--
Computer lab (reading)	5	67	24	7	2	--	--
Self-esteem class	6	88	12	--	--	--	--
Working	7	71	21	7	--	--	--
Being with the other students	8	67	29	--	2	2	--
Being with the adults	9	69	26	--	2	2	--
Field trips	10	64	31	2	2	--	--
Assembly programs	11	60	38	--	--	2	--

2. Would you want to participate in this program again?

Yes 62% No 10% Maybe 29%

Why? _____

3. What could be done to make Project ALERT better?

_____

_____

_____

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When asked if they would like to participate in the program again, a measure of overall satisfaction with the program, most (62%) of the respondents answered "yes." Of the 21 students answering why they would like to participate again, about a third indicated that it was a good experience or an opportunity to learn more. Another third responded that the project was fun or simply that they liked it. The remaining students gave various reasons, including "only thing to do in the summer" and opportunity to "meet new faces."

Students who were not sure whether they would want to participate again generally gave positive reasons for wanting to do so (good teachers, meet a lot of people, good time), but one objected to the project starting so early in the morning.

Only two of the four students who would not want to participate again gave reasons for not wanting to do so ("to get more money for school" and not liking it).

Twenty-four students responded with specific -- and sometimes contradictory -- suggestions for improving Project ALERT. Most of the suggestions related to activities (more trips, more sports, more activities like Project Survival, more work, less work), daily schedule (start later in the day, get off work earlier, work more hours), and money (more money, more tokens). A few suggested changes in quality (better trips, students and teachers work harder, pay attention in class, stop fighting, hot lunches), and one suggested including a good breakfast as part of the program. The generalized responses included both "nothing" and "everything."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

During the summer of 1991, Project ALERT provided a variety of learning opportunities for 68 students rising to grades 8-12 in Atlanta. Most (90%) of these students completed the program; the majority of those who did not complete the program left because of illness. The participants evaluated the program positively, and their attendance rate was satisfactory.

Based upon pretest-posttest scores, students improved both reading and mathematics skills, with the greatest improvement demonstrated in mathematics. A substantial majority of the students enrolled in the project also earned 15 hours of academic credit.

Six performance standards were established for the project. Two could not be met because of an insufficient number of referrals and the timing of the terminations. Three of the performance standards were met or exceeded. One of the performance standards was unclear.

While the level of participation and the acquisition of academic skills were major components of Project ALERT, participants also had opportunities to gain valuable work experiences. In addition to on-the-job skill development, students learned the importance of punctuality, following directions, and cooperation in work settings.

Based upon these results, Project ALERT met its goals and was deemed a success. However, the achievement of performance standards might be enhanced by the following actions:

1. Begin the recruiting process earlier, especially in regard to referrals.

2. Clarify the performance standard relating to terminations and dropouts.

Furthermore, the benefits derived from smaller classes, more attention from teachers and counselors, and structured work experiences combined with academic instruction suggest the possibility of integrating Project ALERT with the remedial program during the regular school term as a way of maintaining or increasing the gains made during the summer.

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